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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: ORISSA VIOLENCE: CALM RESTORED BUT TENSION REMAINS

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Classified By: Ambassador David C. Mulford for Reasons 1.4 (B and D).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: The Orissa state government, aided by the central government which provided additional security forces, has stopped the unrest in riot torn areas following the violence that shook the state when a prominent Hindu leader was assassinated on August 23. The peak of the violence was August 24-26. It subsided after Orissa police and central paramilitary forces reached the affected areas. Sporadic incidents of arson and attempted arson still occur in remote areas, but the state is generally peaceful. The state government has established emergency camps for about 24,000 displaced people and is providing them with food, medicine, health care and other necessities. Some repatriation has begun. The Indian Prime Minister has described the unrest as a "national disgrace."

[1](#)2. (C) While most of the victims of the violence that erupted in late August are Christians, the underlying causes that led to the violence have complicated ethnic, economic and political roots. The religious tensions, which have intensified as Christian churches and Hindu fundamentalists have aggressively competed for members among the poorest of the poor in Orissa's remote Kandhamal district, have aggravated existing antipathy between the two ethnic groups (dalits and the tribals.) India's elaborate quota system, similar to affirmative action programs in the West and designed to confer economic and political preferences to selected underprivileged castes or ethnic groups, has fueled the strife. The fact that Orissa is also a state with a sizable Maoist/Naxalite insurgency has further complicated the social and security environment on the ground. Embassy New Delhi and Consulate General Kolkata found that the Orissa government was ill-prepared to respond to the incident and was sloppy and slow when it did, but there is nothing to suggest that the state was complicit in the violence. Nor is there any evidence to indicate that the Orissa violence is part of any nationwide conspiracy to target Christians. End Summary.

Embassy and Consulate Visit Orissa

[1](#)3. (SBU) During a September 11-13 visit to Orissa, Kolkata Consul General and New Delhi Poloff met with the top of the Orissa state government and with a cross-section of religious, NGO and journalist contacts to discuss the violence that erupted following the August 23 killing of 84-year old Hindu leader Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati and

four other Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) workers. They also discussed the situation with contacts in Kolkata and New Delhi. Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, Governor Mulidhar Bhandare, Chief Secretary A.K. Tripathi, Home Secretary A.K. Mishra, Director General of Police G.C. Nanda and an array of other senior Orissa officials talked freely and candidly with the CG, discussing in detail the antecedents of the conflict, the provocations that led to the latest outbreak, and the relief measures that the authorities have in place.

Situation Calm

14. (SBU) Although a few sporadic incidents continue to flare up in remote parts of Kandhamal district in Orissa, the state government has managed to control the violence and restore calm three weeks after the violence first erupted. The week of September 8 was generally calm, with no deaths reported and only a handful of incidents of arson or attempted arson. The week of September 15 has begun peacefully as well. The authorities have lifted the curfew during the day in the affected areas but re-impose it between 8pm and 6am in selected towns and villages in Kandhamal. The state government has established emergency camps in Kandhamal and surrounding districts and is ensuring food, medicine and other relief material in these camps. The state government has also announced a relief/compensation package for the victims. Several hundred peace committees have been established to help begin the reconciliation process. The Orissa government has appointed a commission under a retired high court judge to investigate the unrest and report back

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within six months.

The Toll

15. (SBU) According to the Orissa Chief Secretary Tripathi and Home Secretary Mishra, as of September 11, the current wave of violence that began with the August 23 killing of Swami Laxmanananda Sasraswati claimed 24 lives of which 9-10 (including the Swami and his four assistants) were Hindus. A majority of the violence occurred on August 24-26, before the police and paramilitary could provide reasonable coverage to the district and establish their writ. According to official sources: number of rapes - one; number injured - 91; number of houses burned - 969; number of churches/religious institutions burned - 72; number of people arrested - 629; number of criminal cases filed - 412. The Orissa government provided similar data to the Indian Supreme Court during the week of September 8. Home Secretary Mishra reinforced the accuracy of the data by noting that no state government or bureaucrat would dare to knowingly provide fabricated data to the Supreme Court because of the severe penalties that the Court could impose.

Relief Measures

16. (SBU) Home Secretary Mishra told CG that the Orissa government has established 18 emergency camps to house about 24,000 people displaced during the riots. Fourteen of these camps are in the Kandhamal district and four are in surrounding districts. He said that the government is ensuring three meals a day, clean water, sanitation and healthcare in these camps. The government is also providing thousands of blankets, shirts, saris, blouses, dhotis (wrap-around cloths traditionally worn by men in the area), mats, buckets, kitchen sets, tents, and mosquito nets to the residents of the camps. Police and paramilitary personnel are proving adequate security. The Orissa government also announced a compensation package that includes 200,000 rupees (\$4,500) to the next of kin of each person who died in the riots, 50,000 rupee (\$1,110) for each house burned, and

15,000-40,000 rupees (\$350-900) for each shop damaged or destroyed. Other measures that the government expects to implement are activation of self-help groups and micro-credit facilities, strengthening of the GOI's food distribution system for the needy, mobile hospital visits to the affected villages, and trauma counseling.

Religious

17. (SBU) According to All India Christian Council's (AICC) Orissa Chapter President Reverend P.R. Paricha, the current conflict is a straightforward case of violent religious intolerance and human rights violations, inspired and directed by extremist Hindu organizations. He said that while the perpetrators were the Kandha tribals, the brains that orchestrated the violence were functionaries of the VHP and similar extremist Hindu organizations. In his view, the only solution is to "stop the Hindu fundamentalists." Reverend Paricha was unable to provide any evidence for his blanket assertions. In CG and Poloff's meetings with others during the Orissa visit a more complicated and nuanced picture emerged in which ethnic, economic and political issues have created the simmering social discontent. Religious tension sparked by competing Hindu and Christian efforts to convert the native inhabitants added fuel to the volatile mix. Maoist/Naxalite presence in the area has further complicated the situation.

18. (C) According to Executive Director of South Asia Human Rights Documentation Center Ravi Nair, a trusted Delhi-based Embassy human rights contact, large areas of Orissa had been untouched by organized religion until recently. In his view, the Christian churches and Hindu organizations view the state as virgin territory in which they must battle each other for the souls of the local populations. The struggle is particularly polarized in Kandhamal, the poorest district in the country's poorest state, where poverty and illiteracy are inescapable ingredients of the social structure. In Kandhamal, with a total population of 650,000, the two competing ethnic groups are the Kandha tribals (52 percent) and the Pana dalits (17 percent). The Christian churches' evangelical efforts have yielded particular success in this district, with the Christian population increasing from 6 percent in 1971 to near 20 percent (120,000) today. Their success has come primarily within the Pana community, which

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now accounts for the vast majority of the district's Christian community. The Kandhas have been more resistant to the Christian message, in part due to their historical antipathy to the dalit Panas.

19. (C) The rapid conversion to Christianity has provoked a response from militant Hindu organizations like the VHP and the Bajrang Dal. They consider the dalits (as well as the tribals) of the district to be basically Hindus, who have been duped by false promises and petty economic allurements to convert. Ravi Nair told New Delhi Poloff that the established mainstream Christian denominations, such as the Roman Catholic and the Anglican churches with vast experience in operating in non-Christian majority areas, have a long-term perspective and have sought to establish themselves gradually and taken care not to upset delicate social balances that have long existed in the region. In contrast, according to him, some of the newer Pentecostal churches have been more impatient for results and engaged in more aggressive proselytizing, which was met by a backlash from non-Christians in the state. Militant Hindu organizations such as the VHP have attempted to compete with the Churches in providing social services such as schools and hospitals with mixed success. They have little experience in evangelical activity or effective non-bellifereous means to counter such activity. As they stumbled in their efforts, they have more frequently resorted to muscular tactics in trying to stem the growing conversions to Christianity.

¶10. (SBU) The communal strains which led to the latest violence first began in 1992 when the success of the Christian churches began to be noticed by the VHP and related Hindu organizations. It has simmered over the last 16 years, occasionally bubbling over into physical clashes. In 1998, the violence broke out again with the murder of Australian missionary John Staines and his two sons in Orissa. The tension reached a new level in December 2007 when Hindu-Christian clashes broke out in the district over Christmas celebrations and an attack on Swami Laxmananda Saraswati by alleged Christian activists. Three people were killed, many injured and several homes burned in the ensuing riots. The August 2008 riots were on an unprecedented scale, indicating the depth and intensity of the underlying hostility. (Note: According to Tehelka magazine, after the December 2007 riots in Orissa, Saraswati gave an interview to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh publication, the Organizer. In it, he called for a constitutional ban on conversions of Hindus to "Abrahamic faiths" and warned that "Christians in India must understand fast that they cannot be protected by the U.S. State Department writing its annual vituperative anti-Hindu reports on religious freedom and human rights." End Note.)

Ethnic

¶11. (SBU) In the view of our non-Christian interlocutors, the religious tension in the region served to aggravate an already volatile situation in which the Kandhas and Panas have strong historical grievances against one another that go back a hundred years. The dalit Panas are seen as more enterprising and shrewder than their Kandha neighbors. They have greater exposure to the outside world and more access to education. Their conversion and life in the Christian community has helped to raise further their awareness and education levels. The growing economic and political dominance of the dalit Panas has left the Kandhas feeling increasingly cornered and embittered. However, our Christian interlocutors denied an ethnic angle to the conflict, saying that it is merely VHP-inspired hate for Christians that is responsible for the violence.

Economic

¶12. (SBU) Perhaps the most compelling reasons behind the Kandhamal violence lie in economic issues. Almost every interlocutor the CG and Poloff met pointed the finger at India's elaborate quota system, which is designed to provide a menu of economic benefits to various underprivileged castes and groups. In Kandhamal, the Panas enjoy Schedule Caste (SC) status while the Kandhas are classified as Schedule Tribes (ST). Each category comes with its attendant quotas, although the Kandhas' ST preferences are superior to the Panas' SC benefits, especially in relation to land ownership rights. In tribal majority districts such as Kandhamal, tribals have ownership rights over forest land, which cannot be transferred to non-tribals.

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¶13. (SBU) The twist that further exacerbates the conflict is that under the Indian Constitution Christians (and other religious denominations that do not recognize caste) do not enjoy any quotas that are based on caste. The dalit Panas, therefore, lose their SC benefits on conversion to Christianity. The most common complaint that the CG heard from non-Christians, including the Orissa bureaucracy, was that the Panas who convert continue to identify themselves as Hindus in order to obtain employment and education benefits under the SC category. There were also accusations that the Panas were obtaining fraudulent ST certificates to obtain ST benefits. The debate over SC and ST rights has been further muddled by a movement, supported by many Christian groups in

the area, to reclassify the Panas as a tribal group. If this were to happen, the Panas, regardless of whether they are Christians or not, would enjoy the same ST benefits as the Kandhas. Many in the non-Kandha, non-Pana Hindu community in the district believe that the Christian Panas are encroaching on their turf, which is the small trader commercial activity.

Political

¶14. (SBU) The Schedule Tribe status enjoyed by the Kandhas in the district also confers on them certain political benefits. Under Indian law, only tribals can be elected head of government at the village, sub-district and district levels. The move by dalit Panas to officially have their group reclassified as a Schedule Tribe threatens the political power of the Kandhas.

¶15. (SBU) There have been frequent allegations that political parties have stoked the fires in Kandhamal for political gain. The most frequent accusation is that the VHP and other Hindu organizations are deliberately provoking the violence in order to consolidate support for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP - the junior partner in the state's ruling coalition government) in the coming national elections. There have also been allegations that Congress Party leaders in Kandhamal have organized Kandha women to protest the relief and support being provided to Panas in the emergency camps established by the government.

Who Killed Swami Laxmanananda?

¶16. (C) No one has been yet been arrested in the killing of Swami Laxmanananda on August 23 that sparked the August riots and there is disagreement over whether the killers were Maoists/Naxalites or Christian militants. The Orissa police had announced that the Maoists/Naxalites were the culprits, but Orissa Chief Secretary Tripathi and Home Secretary Mishra suggested to Kolkata CG that the police may have gotten ahead of themselves and that they did not have hard evidence to back up their assessment. The police have released composite drawings of two men who were identified by witnesses as the leaders of the group that attacked the Swami. Maoists/Naxalites have come under suspicion because of the belief that only they have the sophisticated weaponry and the operational capacity to conduct the well planned and sophisticated attack on the Swami.

¶17. (C) NDTV correspondent Sampat Mahapatra claimed that the top two Maoist leaders in the area had told him they did not have a religious agenda but their Christian followers had pressured the Maoist leadership to allow them to assassinate the Swami. VHP Orissa Acting President Dr. Umesh Patri was convinced that Christian militants were responsible, noting that they had been targeting the Swami for some time and had finally succeeded in their efforts. AICC's Reverend Paricha firmly denied any Christian links to the Swami's death, saying that the Churches in the area do not have such violent inclinations. He hinted at a more conspiratorial and twisted plot when he suggested that police protection for the Swami had been mysteriously lifted just before he was attacked. An Orissa politician told Kolkata FSN that he had heard that the assassination was a "mercenary" operation in which the Maoists were paid to assassinate the Swami. Dr. Pradhan, head of a secular NGO, told Poloff that there are extremists groups within the Christian community who can match the Hindu extremists and are capable of such violence.

Orissa Government: In Way Over its Head?

¶18. (C) Orissa Chief Secretary Tripathi admitted that the

state government was surprised at the speed, scale and intensity of the riots. Home Secretary Mishra bemoaned that the state did not have adequate police personnel to respond to riots on such a scale. He noted that Orissa has only 93 police personnel for every 100,000 people, far below the national average which is about 600 police personnel for every 100,000 people. In explaining the delayed police response to the riots, both Tripathi and Mishra pointed to the remoteness and inaccessibility of the heavily forested Kandhamal district and the fact that some of the rioters had blocked roads by felling trees on them. Mishra said he had requested the GOI in Delhi provide additional paramilitary forces on the night of the Swami's death, but for various logistical reasons, it took three to four days before the four battalions of the Central Reserve Police Force arrived on the scene.

¶19. (C) Jagdish Pradhan of a secular NGO that has worked with U.N agencies in the state for decades said that the violence was a result of an intelligence failure by the Orissa government. In his view, the signs of the Kandha-Pana conflict were there for everyone to see, and it was merely a matter of time before some incident sparked the violence. NDTV's Sampat Mahapatra was more scathing in his criticism of the Orissa government. He felt that the Home Secretary and the Director General of Police were clueless bureaucrats, good at pushing paper but incapable of handling a complex situation which requires a firm hand and some imagination.

Funding

¶20. (C) CG and Poloff were unable to elicit any useful information in Orissa about funding sources for the religious activists on both sides other than to learn that there may be significant outside money coming in. Home Secretary Mishra said that the GOI does not share with the Orissa government any information about foreign money being funneled to the state due to Indian law relating to foreign exchange and MOUs between the GOI and international organizations that govern the latter's activities in India. Our interlocutors generally agreed that the confrontation has helped both sides mobilize increased fund raising outside Orissa.

Exaggeration by AICC, No Engagement by VHP

¶21. (C) Although the AICC initially told us of "massive killings and burning and gang-rapes," they could not provide any evidence or credible reasoning to dispute the government's numbers. Following close questioning of the basis of their claims, the AICC conceded that it was aware of only one rape case and it had no independent information on the number of cases of arson. The AICC did have a list of 35 persons killed, but could not tell us how it was compiled and who provided the information on which the list was based. The VHP officials we met did not even engage on the issue of violence. They simply said that conversion was being bought by the Christian churches and it must be stopped.

Comment: Way Ahead

¶22. (C) Unfortunately, the CG and Poloff did not see any signs that the players on the ground are looking ahead and trying to find a way forward that mitigates more confrontation and violence. Home Secretary Mishra talked about plans to expand the police force. More police will certainly help in curbing violence, but lasting solutions that pave the way for reconciliation are not being examined. We did not find any common ground between the two opposing sides. For the AICC, the only way forward is for someone to "stop the VHP and the extremist Hindu organizations." There were no signs of compromise from the VHP, one of whose officials told us: "Everyone knows you can't trust the Pana." If anything, the measures that the Orissa government is discussing - enforcement of Orissa's religious conversion laws, more scrutiny of ST and SC certification when providing

job and education benefits to applicants - will only polarize the communities further. Absent any fresh and imaginative ideas from the players that are focused on increasing understanding between the communities , we expect the tensions to remain for the foreseeable future and violence to boil over occasionally as each side looks for some provocation.

Comment: No Evidence of State Complicity

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123. (C) CG and Poloff found many examples of the state government's incompetence and clumsiness in dealing with the unrest. They did not see the flare-up coming although the signs were all around them. They were slow to respond, ill-equipped, and poorly trained. However, we found no indication that the Orissa government was complicit, either actively or by tacit consent in enabling the riots and allowing one group to victimize another. The government appears well intentioned but not up to the job. NDTV's Mahapatra observed that the Orissa government is bungling and ineffective during the best of times so it was not surprising that it was completely at sea during the recent unrest. Nor did the Embassy or the Consulate find any evidence that the Orissa unrest is part of any nationwide conspiracy to target Christians. While post continues to explore the possibility that greater levels of violence occur in in BJP-ruled states, the reality may be the converse: the BJP takes advantage of underlying tensions in its quest for electoral gain.
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